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ON THE ORIGIN OF WALLER'S COUPLETS,

BY WILLIAM W. GAY.

WHEN Jonathan Swift in the first fresh colors of his satirical humor portrayed Grub Street for Prince Posterity, he painted an immortal picture of literary London at the opening of the eighteenth century. As we contemplate it only a slight effort of imagination is needed to hear the shrill cries of the hawkers selling at the coffee-houses the latest political libel: to see the perukes of the wits and the dandies bending over the day's attack upon the ministry, the most recent scandal in high life, or the last essay in verse of the reigning poet. It was a time of extraordinary, even feverish literary activity, in which the latest lampoon vied with the last bulletin from Marlborough's victorious army, and under the assaults of wit ministers fell with the regularity of the defeat of the French.

Of the horde of men who then labored in the field of letters and starved in the hope of fame, how many names survive? A few makers of verse are now and then upon occasions read, and the genius of but one of these was brilliant enough to penetrate to us through the mists of formalism. The age of Anne was an age of prose. Its triumphs were won by Addison, Steele, Swift and DeFoe, who have given us prose which men will read even though Pope shall have sunk, like his foes in the Dunciad, under the thick, black waters of Oblivion. It is not the "Essay on Man" or the "Rape of the Lock," poems which dimmed for eighteenth-century eyes the suns of Spenser, Chaucer and Shakespeare, that first challenge our admiration, but the "Spectator," the "Tale of the Tub" and "Robinson Crusoe." Never until then had England produced for the delight of men such prose, though Ascham, and Bacon, and Hooker, and Taylor and Milton had exercised their genius in it.

Great was the contrast with the opening years of the seventeenth century when yet the Elizabethan choir were in full song. The English muse, free, buoyant and natural then, now walked in trammels like a school miss bound by the rules of correct deportment. In 1600 "Hamlet," "Othello," "Lear," "Antony and Cleopatra," "Twelfth Night" and the "Tempest" were yet to be given to the public. Jonson's "Volpone" and "Alchemist" had not been written. Massinger, Fletcher, Webster and Ford were yet to do their work. In 1700 Milton, the last great English poet to hold the Elizabethan tradition, had been in his grave but twenty-six years. Herrick, whose lyrics still dance in the minds of men, had died as lately, and Ben Jonson had left his sons to mourn his empty seat at the Mermaid little more than fifty years before. In so short a time how great a revolution in the taste of intellectual England! How was it that men came to prefer the verses of Swift, of Prior, Parnell and Gay to the musical and imaginative poetry of the Elizabethans? the "Essay on Man" to "Hero and Leander"? the "Campaign" to Drayton's martial "Agincourt"? the comedies of Wycherly to "Twelfth Night" and "As You Like it"? What was it that so dulled English minds that Shakespeare and Jonson and all the poets of their day seemed rude, barbarous and without taste?

Whim will sometimes account well enough for the fact that a people occasionally will neglect a really great writer for an inconsequential rival who has struck by chance a popular note. So a gust of wind will drive a bee from the honeysuckle or clover to some coarser bloom. But there must be something stronger than whim or fashion so to change a whole nation's taste that it became possible for Hume to say with applause that "of all the great poets Virgil and Racine" seemed the most just as lying farthest from the extremes of ornamentation, and therefore the most admirable, and to declare with the sunlight of the Elizabethan age shining in his eyes that "with regard to the stage, they (the French) have excelled even the Greeks, who far excelled the English," so placing Racine in his pseudo-classicism far up on Olympus not only above Shakespeare, but above *Æschylus*, *Sophocles* and *Euripides*.

Until within recent years this great change in the spirit of English letters, particularly the rise of the classical school of poetry, was attributed to French example as a matter of course.

It was an easy solution of a difficult problem and one that seemed obvious. The great authority of Boileau, the co-existence of the two similar schools in France and England, the long exile in France, at a time when the French classical poets were flourishing, of certain English poets who became conspicuous after the restoration and the French sympathies of the court of Charles II naturally suggested the solution. So firm had this conclusion become through long acceptance that when Mr. Gosse delivered his lectures before Johns Hopkins University combating this view as unhistorical and wholly untenable, he aroused almost a storm of hostile criticism. But Mr. Gosse demonstrated the very great probability that Edmund Waller had written in the reformed couplet "To the King on His Navy" and others of his early poems before Malherbe published his first essays in verse, and, accepting this as true, that the appearance in English literature of the school of Waller, Dryden and Pope was a phenomenon to be attributed wholly to native influences. Beyond that he did not go. Briefly to discover what those influences were, and, more particularly, where Waller found the pattern of his couplets, or the inspiration to them, are the objects of this essay.

It is not to be denied that the French poets and critics exerted a strong influence over English writers. Dryden, to a certain degree, especially in the use of rhyme in dramatic composition, was affected by them, although he said he was led to make his experiments in rhymed drama rather by the example of some of the older English writers. To a far greater degree Pope and Addison were under the French spell. But it may be said with confidence that this influence was strong chiefly because it was in harmony with an original, native movement, that it only confirmed a taste which had already developed through a natural evolution. Had the reformed couplet been the result of a purely imitative fashion, the movement never would have become the literary tyranny which in fact it was. It probably would have passed away in a decade or two as the rhymed tragedy passed, and as went the imitative school which in the latter part of the last century sought to naturalize in the commonwealth of English poetry the more artificial verse forms of the early French poets.

Those who have accepted the theory of French dominance and English tutelage have done so in disregard of the opinion

of one whose statements in such matters we are bound to respect. Dryden, who found that he had "a soul congenial to" Chaucer's, and that they "had been conversant in the same studios," was insistent upon the natural development of English poetry and a line of inheritance from Chaucer to himself and his contemporaries. He discovered in the poems of "the father of English poetry" many verses "of ten syllables, and the words not much behind our present English; as, for example, these two lines in the description of the carpenter's wife:

"Winning she was as is a jolly colt,
Long as a mast and upright as a bolt."

He was, it is true, speaking then rather of the supposed roughness of Chaucer's verse and of his use of obsolete words than of any imagined similarity between his couplets and Waller's; but Dryden's opinion clearly was that the English poetry of his day was wholly native; and he who was the first great English critic, who has been called the first of English men of letters, who undoubtedly was more deeply read in English literature than any other Englishman then living, gave the credit of reforming English versification to Waller and Denham.

Now what were the causes of this strange change in the form and spirit of poetry which began so early in the seventeenth century while Elizabethan poets were still upon the stage? Poets are creatures largely of their environment, and when they make a strong impression upon their times it is because they express earlier or better than others the temper and thought of their day. Discarding the theory of French influence, then, we must look for the causes of so remarkable a phenomenon to the intellectual or social movements preceding or accompanying it. Genius knows no law of succession, and the appearance of a compelling genius often seems as unaccountable as a miracle; but the decline of the impulsive and creative spirit of a people to the artificial and mechanical is generally plain and gradual and is to be accounted for not in radical changes in men's natures but in the existence of new centres of human interest.

It was such a decline which began early in the seventeenth century following the sudden, short-lived efflorescence of passionate poetry among the Elizabethans. Men were as passionate under James and Charles as under Elizabeth, and they were more strongly because more sincerely moved out of their ordi-

nary feelings; but the turbulence of their passions ran in new channels. Their hearts were in their religious and political controversies. They were no longer curious observers of the external world, but of the inner, and as their eyes turned from the greater world to the smaller of self-interest, their horizon narrowed and the spirit dwarfed. It was under these conditions that the new school of poetry had its obvious beginning. A new spirit was beginning to move English minds. A new England was about to arise, and, in some respects, a new Englishman. Modern industrial England was beginning, or about to begin, to lay its foundations. A rapid increase of wealth among the people was soon to establish the "money interest." The Puritan movement was nursing a democratic spirit which modified greatly the ideals of English society. A lively sense of peril to church and to private property united noble and commoner in an attack upon prerogative with the direct result of the Commonwealth.

It was the Puritan and the political movements which most obviously affected English thought, but the new philosophy of Bacon was working with them to the same ends. It inspired scholars both in the universities and at London to question popular beliefs and to explore the field of nature, awakening a scepticism which was to give England a Locke and beget the deism of the next century. A thousand controversies were awakened. Authority was attacked in all its seats, and search was begun for truth, for new foundations of belief in statecraft, theology and the physical sciences.

Now the language of science and of controversy is prose. When images rather than facts preoccupied the mind, and the Latin was deemed the true language of the scholar, English prose was quaint or stately, often overburdened with quotations from the classics, not seldom pompous or obscure; but now, when the practical Englishman supplants the romantic, and the soul struggles to deliver itself of its message in the most convincing way, we find him gradually abandoning the style of his fathers and slowly polishing his sentences in the heat of controversy. The change first appears naturally in the Parliament where Sir John Eliot surprises his fellows with a new order of forensic eloquence and gives them their first examples of direct, simple, vigorous statements of fact and reasons. The new spirit steadily permeates English scholarship until English prose finds its high-

est expression of that century in the writings of Tillotson and Dryden.

In such an atmosphere a poet who would speak the language of the day and command the attention of a people given up to a search for truth and the pursuit of holiness, must be in great measure didactic, and that is precisely what Waller was, though he aspired to a lyric wreath: and it is significant that the poet who was to affect profoundly for a hundred years the poetry of England was a Parliament man and one of the first debaters of the House of Commons.

In other words, the English people lost their relish for poetry and developed a passion for prose. Their "love of concrete imagery" so characteristic of the Elizabethan gave way to their love of fact. They ceased to be rhapsodical and became argumentative. Imagination withered and reflection flourished. Those poets who believed themselves to be the heirs of the mantles of the greater singers of Elizabeth imitated chiefly their weaknesses. To a realization of their absurdities Mr. Gosse and others have attributed the revulsion in taste which established the authority of Waller.

Well-known facts have been recited at some length not only to account for Waller and in some degree for the directness, simplicity and lucidity of expression which characterized his school, but also for his ready acceptance by English readers. His style of versification was exactly suited to the mental mood which was becoming a general habit of mind of many Englishmen. To a sober, deadly earnest and militant soul convinced of the existence of great social evils and national peril and resolved to end them, the Elizabethan singers had become triflers, their lyric power weakness, and their revelations of truth in the lightning flashes of genius only foolishness. Waller's method lent itself to the fuller and better expression of the subjective spirit of the age, and therefore it was welcomed and developed until it broke down under the weight of rhymed systems of philosophy as the Elizabethan method was already breaking down under the burden of conceits.

Why Waller adopted the heroic couplet in constructing his chief poems is not hard to understand. It was a common form of English verse. As it is to-day, so then it was the natural vehicle of didacticism. Chaucer had used it. Spenser had em-

ployed it. The satirists had found it the best weapon of their warfare: and the poet who to-day should set himself at the task of writing a poetical address or a satirical poem of any length would find it hard to resist the attraction of the heroic couplet whose dignity, flow and balanced clauses, with the music of recurring rhyme, still fascinate in spite of a monotony that in time must weary the ear.

Now Waller was not first of all a poet. He was first a rhetorician, an orator and a politician who found congenial the turmoil and intrigue resulting from the life-and-death struggle between king and Parliament. He was a reformer to whose mind the new political ideas appealed—in short, a man of affairs of the day. Naturally as the result of his own temperament and of his environment he fell into didacticism, and when he set up as a poet, led by instinct, he adopted the rhymed pentameter couplet as his proper medium of expression.

But Waller's couplets differed from those of his predecessors in two important particulars. As a rule the older writers had these faults unpardonable in the eyes of the wits of Queen Anne—their versification was rugged and unrestrained. A single sentence would be carried or a thought pursued through many consecutive verses, often ending in the middle of a line. This tendency to overflow led to slovenliness in construction, sometimes to wearisome prolixity, and not infrequently to obscurity. In Waller's verses we discover for the first time in compositions wholly in heroic couplets an evident and a sustained effort to avoid these faults. His words are chosen with care for the smoothness and harmony of his lines, and rarely is he guilty of an overflow. In very early verses we find him restraining his thought to each couplet, as in these:

“Where e'er thy Navy spreads her canvas Wings,
Homage to thee, and Peace to all she brings:
The French and Spaniard when thy Flags appear
Forget their Hatred and consent to fear.”

These lines as they appear in the first authorized edition of Waller's poems published in 1664 might have been written by Joseph Addison, yet unless, as Johnson supposed, they were polished by the poet before their first surreptitious publication in 1645, they were among the first-fruits of his youthful muse.

Now it may be that a poet shall arise, by force of genius,

without artistic forebears, the singular product of unprecedented conditions, but it is not probable that there ever was or ever will be such a one, no matter how impossible it may seem to account historically for him. Before Homer sang the gods were. And Waller was only a man of talent. With all due respect for the great men who sat at his feet, as some of them sat also at the feet of the seventeenth-century Pindar, he is not now to be considered as more than a versesmith who hammered out couplets remarkable for the time, which were to affect profoundly the course of English poetry, but have value to-day chiefly for the student. He was competent in his trade, but Dorothy Sidney, as has been said, was a better judge than Waller's imitators, of the quality of his cold and polished verses to Sacharissa.

On the authority of Dryden we know that Waller acknowledged Edward Fairfax, an Elizabethan poet, as his literary master. In Dryden's preface to the fables he says that "many besides myself have heard our famous Waller own that he derived the harmony of his numbers from the 'Godfrey of Bulloign' which was turned into English by Mr. Fairfax." Johnson repeats this, adding that by his own nicety of observation as well as the perusal of Fairfax's "Tasso," "he had already formed such a system of metrical harmony as he never afterwards much needed or much endeavored to improve." And it has been recorded—by Johnson, perhaps—that Waller was so entranced by Fairfax's translation that he committed large portions of it to memory.

Fairfax's "Tasso" was first published in 1600. Two reprints were made in the seventeenth century, both of them said to be inaccurate. A fourth edition with the Elizabethan spelling somewhat modernized appeared in 1749. From this later edition such extracts as are here given have been taken. The stanza used by Fairfax is composed of six lines alternately rhyming and a closing rhymed pentameter couplet as follows:

"The sacred Armies and the godly Knight,
 Who the great Sepulcher of Christ did free,
 I sing: much wrought his Valour and Foresight,
 And in that glorious War much suffer'd he:
 In vain 'gainst him did Hell oppose her Might,
 In vain the Turks and Morians arm'd be;
 His Soldiers wild, to Brawls and Mut'nies prest,
 Reduced he to Peace, so Heav'n him blest."

A similar versification was adopted by Spenser in composing his

"Muipotmos," or the "Fate of the Butterfly," published nine years before the "Tasso." There are some things about this poem of Spenser's which lead one to think that Fairfax studied it in composing his own verses, but it is rather to the dissimilarities of the two that attention is now to be paid, and for this purpose these stanzas are taken from it:

"I sing of deadly dolorous debate,
 Stirr'd up through wrathful Nemesis' despite,
 Betwixt two mighty ones of great estate,
 Drawn into arms, and proof of mortal fight,
 Through proud ambition and heart-swelling hate,
 Whilst neither could the other's greater might
 And 'sdainful scorn endure: that from small jar
 Their wrath at length broke into open war:
 "The root whereof and tragical effect
 Vouchsafe, O thou, the mournfull'st Muse of nine,
 That wont'st the tragic stage for to direct,
 In funeral complaints and wailful time,
 Reveal to me and all the means detect,
 Through which sad Clarion did at last decline
 To lowest wretchedness: and is there then
 Such rancour in the hearts of mighty men?"

Compare with these typical stanzas of Spenser almost any consecutive stanzas of Fairfax and there will be observed in the latter a great advance toward the simplicity of construction and the restraint of the writers of the succeeding epoch. In Spenser's verse the tendency to overflow is strong. In most of the stanzas of "Muipotmos" the reader is hurried along almost breathlessly sometimes to the end of each, and in the two quoted, through, in effect, fourteen verses and part of the fifteenth. Consider now these stanzas taken from the twelfth book of the "Tasso" in which the fight between Clorinda and Tancred is described:

"He deem'd she was some Man of mickle Might,
 And on her Person would he Worship win;
 Over the Hills the Nymph her Journey dight
 Towards another Port, there to get in;
 With hideous Noise fast after spurr'd the Knight;
 She heard and stay'd, and thus her Words begin;
 What Haste hast thou? Ride softly; take thy Breath;
 What bringest thou? he answer'd—War and Death.
 "And War and Death, quoth she, here may'st thou get,
 If thou for Battle come; with that she stay'd:
 Tancred to Ground his Foot in Haste down set,
 And left his Steed; on Foot he saw the Maid;

Their Courage hot, their Ire and Wrath they whet,
 And either Champion drew a trenchant Blade;
 Together run they and together struck,
 Like two fierce Bulls whom Rage and Love provoke.

“Shame bred Desire a sharp Revenge to take,
 And Vengeance taken gave new Cause of Shame;
 So that with Haste and little Heed they strake;
 Fuel enough they had to feed the Flame;
 At last so close their Battle fierce they make
 They could not wield their Swords; so nigh they came
 They us’d the Hilts, and each on other rush’d,
 And Helm ’gainst Helm, and Shield ’gainst Shield they crush’d.”

There are in Fairfax’s translation 1,917 stanzas, of which those just quoted are in the matter of verse construction fair representatives. It will be noticed that, in marked contrast with those of Spenser, they are free from the breathless overflow so common in Elizabethan poetry, and the expression of thought rests naturally and almost invariably with the completion of each unrhymed couplet, or of a single verse. Examination of the poem will show that this restraint is not occasional but constant, and will compel the conclusion that Fairfax was deliberate and purposeful in its employment. If this be true he is alone among the poets of Elizabeth’s time to use this style of verse construction in a poem of great length.

The simplicity of Fairfax and his restraint are even more marked when brought in comparison with the looseness of the verses of Daniel, from whose “Civil War” the following part of the description of the death of Talbot are taken:

“So much true resolution wrought in those
 Who had made covenant with death before,
 That their small number (scorning so great foes)
 Made France most happy, that there were no more,
 And Fortune doubt to whom she might dispose
 That weary day; or unto whom restore
 The glory of a contest dearly bought,
 Which scarce the conqueror could think well got.

“For as with equal rage and equal might,
 Two adverse winds combat with billows proud,
 And neither yield (seas, skies maintain like fight,
 Wave against wave oppos’d, and cloud to cloud);
 So war both sides with obstinate despite,
 With like revenge; and neither party bow’d;
 Fronting each other with confounding blows,
 No wound one sword unto the other owes.”

Compared with Daniel, Fairfax is lucidity itself: and if, as Dryden says, Waller owned that he derived the harmony of his numbers from the "Godfrey of Bulloign," and if Waller was so captivated by that poem that he learned it by heart and used to repeat large portions of it, is it hard to believe that it strongly influenced his own composition? That the talented young man whose great wealth permitted him to indulge his taste in the study of the poets and the inditing of courtly verses recognized in his favorite and master a departure from the style of the older poets? And, seeing its great merit—that it kept the poet from obscurity and cumbrous sentences—he deliberately imitated Fairfax?

But Waller did not employ the stanza of Fairfax. He composed his chief poems in the heroic couplet. The attempt has been made to show why he did so; let us see whether he may not have acquired some of his dexterity in framing his couplets, as he had probably acquired his taste for lucidity and simplicity from Fairfax. Here are some characteristic couplets from Waller's poems:

"Ships heretofore in Seas like Fishes sped,
The mightiest still upon the smallest fed.

"He rent the Crown from vanquisht Henry's Head,
Raised the white Rose and traml'd on the red.

"They Roses seem which in their early Pride
But half reveal and half their Beauties hide.

"So proud a Fabric to Devotion given,
As once it threat'neth and obligeth Heaven."

Compare with these couplets, which excited the admiration of Waller's contemporaries and successors on the English Parnassus, the following used by Fairfax in closing his stanzas:

"Thus he appear'd, and thus be 'gan to teach,
In Shape an Angel, and, a God in speech.

"A worthy End fit for a Man of Fame
Who dying slew, and conquer'd overcame.

"They make this Fortune who are stout and wise;
Wit rules the Heav'ns, Discretion rules the Skies.

"And make your Hearts resolv'd in all Assays
To win with Honor and to die with Praise."

Are such strong resemblances merely accidental? It might well be so if such couplets were few, but many may be culled from

the Elizabethan poet's work of strong, unmistakable family resemblance to those of the younger writer, and now and then may be found one which in sententiousness, simplicity and swing is strongly akin to Addison's or Pope's. How very far in advance of the usual Elizabethan couplet Fairfax's are, let these of old Chapman's tell:

"Thus charg'd he: nor Algcides deni'd,
But to his feet his fair wing'd shoes he ti'd,
Ambrosian, golden; that in his command
Put either sea, or the unmeasur'd land,
With pace as steady as a puff of wind."

If the facts which have been presented are sufficient to establish the theory of the writer, these conclusions must be drawn:

First, the revolution of taste in the seventeenth century and the rise of the classical school of poetry was an independent, native movement unaffected in its beginnings by a similar movement in France.

Second, that it was largely if not entirely due to the political and religious controversies which absorbed public attention, turned English writers into pamphleteers and created a national relish for didactic composition.

Third, that, as a result of this new English mood, the heroic couplet became the natural and popular medium of poetic expression, and that it was reformed by Waller, who had learned the art of restrained and lucid writing from the Elizabethan, Edward Fairfax.

But did Fairfax write wholly from inspiration and without a model? Probably not, although it may be difficult to trace the influences by which he may have been affected. Spenser most probably was the master of Fairfax—we know little about the poet which we may rely upon as certain—as Chaucer was Spenser's; and if, as conjectured, Spenser's "Muiopotmos" was studied by Fairfax when he was composing his own stanzas, it may be that he there learned to avoid the overflow; for certain of its stanzas are as restrained as any of Fairfax's and stand in strong contrast with those quoted above.

The conclusions arrived at raise the question: How is the curious fact that there existed in France and England two literary movements almost identical in character but wholly in-

dependent, to be accounted for? Mr. Gosse contented himself with the supposition that the spirit of reform was "in the air." As a matter of fact, not only a spirit of reform, but a spirit of liberty was in the air, and the same social and spiritual unrest was agitating the French and English alike. The long religious wars which tore France into factions and ceased only when Henry IV, the Protestant leader, mounted the throne, and the bitter political struggles between the nobles and the two cardinals were doing for France exactly what the Puritan and political movements did for England. In France, too, a sceptical philosophy arose, and the democratic impulse, suppressed during the long and brilliant reign of Louis XIV, was to result as in England, but long afterward, in a bloody revolution and a republic. As the same influences affected English letters, so we may believe they affected literature in France.

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